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INDIANA UNIVERSITY BULLETIN



President Bryan's Commencement Address

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Commencement Day Address to the Class of 1909

BY PRESIDENT WILLIAM LOWE BRYAN, LL. D.

*"But this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark."—
Philippians, iii, 13-14.*

I. "Forgetting those things which are behind."

Mercier says that one of the surest marks of superiority is power to forget. Some of you may on that score immediately claim superiority. Since, perhaps, most of what you have learned in fifteen or twenty years' schooling is already gone, and most of the rest ready to go. But Mercier, who was a distinguished student and physician of the mind, spoke seriously. In point of fact, all things that grow come up by a process which is exactly like forgetting. The higher species has come up by dropping, all along the way, characters once necessary, and then neces-

sary to be dropped. Your own body has come up—very swiftly in the embryonic period, and then more slowly in infancy and youth—dropping characters that belong to the past. Human society has come up a little way out of savagery, leaving behind a trail of beliefs and customs whose end is to be forgotten. This is the kind of thing Mercier meant, when he said that the superior mind has unusual power to forget.

The truth is, we are all full of things that a civilized man is better without. Let me give three illustrations.

Almost every one of you begins his life occupation with some habits of work which are slow, ineffective, and wasteful. You have mental habits analogous to the child trick of counting upon your fingers, instead of using the far swifter tables of the arithmetic. You have habits analogous to digging out sentences with a dictionary and grammar, instead of having gained free power to read. You have habits such as letting part of your mind wander at play, while the rest is pretending to work. You have habits such as working with the hurry and bustle of ants, without foresight, without plan. If you have such habits of work as these, and try to go through life with them, you can never be a master workman. You may labor and sweat, but your years of effort will leave you an ineffective drudge. I counsel you to take stock of your bad habits of work, and be rid of them.

Second, I counsel you to seek wisdom in the matter of changing your ideas. Truth is eternal, but the eternal truth is never wholly in any statement, or theory, or creed of men. Whenever men think to hold the complete and

eternal truth safe and fast, in any theory, or creed, or institution, it is (as Royce suggests) as when Christ was sealed and guarded in a tomb. The tomb is broken and a voice comes, saying, "He is not here; He is risen." There is no more fundamental wisdom than to know how to turn with hope from the grave from which the truth has broken.

Third, you are full of instincts which you should let fall asleep. You are crowded with instincts which come from far off ancestors. Those instincts rose from necessity. They had, perhaps, their day of use. Many of them are still necessary. Others belong to the past, and you must not wake them up. These are literally your ghosts. These are literally your demons. These are literally the unclean spirits which can drive you to madness. It is easy to wake them up. Let them sleep as you value your life.

II. "*Reaching forth unto those things that are before.*"

Now, there is a best way to forget any of these things—ideas, habits, or instincts. The way to forget is not by trying to forget. The best way to forget anything at all is to think with all your might of something else. Whenever you think with all your might of any one thing, everything else disappears, unless it can come in as part of what you are thinking about. Whenever you think of anything with all your might, your whole soul and body, heart and lungs, muscles, ideas, feelings, all obey,—all work together in obedience to the dominant idea. Things useful to that idea come in. Things useless are shut out, and for the time forgotten. And so, if you keep on thinking with

all your might about anything, if for days and for years you give yourself to any idea, that idea makes you over. That idea sifts you, uses you, organizes you, and what it cannot use it casts away into oblivion. Forgetting of every scrt is a thing that takes care of itself, if only you are able te think with all your might of something else.

III. "*I press toward the mark.*"

But if this is so, then far and away the most important concern for every one of us is what that something shall be. Be a money-maker for forty years. Day in and day out, waking and dreaming, work with cold intensity, like Balzac's M. Grandet, to make thousands and to save the price of a candle; and mark the result. Such a passion will kill out of you the habits and vices which are of a lower level. But also it will kill out the aspirations and possibilities of higher levels. After forty years of such a passion, you have the soul and the eyes of a rat. Turn instead to any great occupation, on its highest level. Find one of its greatest living men, and become his disciple. Get sight of his great idea. Get a sense of the man at his best. See how he works. How he makes his time and energy count. Above all things, see what the man at his best is trying to do. Fill your mind with that. Give yourself to that. And presently the great world values to which your master has pointed the way, will have filled you, will have cleansed you from lower habits and ideas and instincts, and will have lifted you into the wisdom and strength of a man.

In the closing pages of the 'Republic,' Plato has a fa-

mous myth, which tells how a certain man by the name of Er went to the other world, and saw the souls of men given a chance to come back to this world and to choose the lives they should lead. And there came a prophet who said:

“Hear the word of Lachesis, daughter of Necessity: Mortal souls, behold a new cycle of life and mortality! Let him who draws the first lot have the first choice, and the life that he chooses shall be his destiny. Virtue is free, and as a man honors her he will have more or less of her. The responsibility is with the loser. God is justified.”

And then Er saw the multitude come forward, and choose their new lives. The first man chose instantly the life of a king; only to see after he had chosen that the life he had chosen was fated to end in misery, and that he would devour his own children. So the people crowded up, each choosing a life—some choosing wisely: some choosing foolishly, and then at once blaming the gods, or chance, for their miserable fate.

My children, I stand today where Er stood, and I see you coming up to the knees of Lachesis to choose your lives. And I repeat to you the word of the prophet: “The life that you *choose* shall be your destiny.”



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